

# Newsletter

November 2017



## Welcome

A big thank you to all those who attended our open meeting at the ARCA hall in Thanington on 13<sup>th</sup> November. Michael Walter, one of the Love Hambrook Marshes trustees, gave a talk about the recent history, present management and wildlife of the area, after which David Lewis, another trustee, announced that we are looking for new trustees to fill vacancies and so ensure that the charity can move forward with fresh enthusiasm to undertake new projects and continue the vital work of protecting this valuable site. You should already have received details about the trustee vacancies, but the closing date for applications isn't until 15<sup>th</sup> December, so there is still time to register your interest, and we hope you will excuse us if we repeat the basic information here:

The CIO (Charitable Incorporated Organisation) that runs Hambrook Marshes wishes to recruit several additional Trustees. Applicants are sought in four main work areas: a Secretary (to organise Trustee meetings); a Land Manager (to oversee site maintenance); a Treasurer (to oversee budgets, the CIO bank account, and financial reporting); and a Grants Officer (to liaise with Natural England and ensure that the CIO receives appropriate NE grants). We will be flexible in matching the interests and experiences of individual applicants to the various categories of work. If you have experience in any of these areas and wish to apply, or would simply like to know more about what is expected of Trustees, David Lewis would be pleased to hear from you ([lovehambrook@gmail.com](mailto:lovehambrook@gmail.com)). Closing date for applications is 15 December 2017.

If you haven't already applied, please consider doing so: the Marshes need your support.

## What's happening on the marshes?

As part of a week-long programme of environmental projects organised by the Westgate Parks project officers, Anna Bell and Lauren Baker, 24 students and staff from the Business and Travel & Tourism department of Canterbury College carried out a litter pick on the Marshes on 23<sup>rd</sup> November. Several bags of rubbish were collected, along with..... a shopping basket!

## Wildlife Report



A disturbing feature of the month was the discovery of a headless and neckless mute swan on 6<sup>th</sup> (left). When I saw it the corpse was some 20yd into Tonford Field, but the previous day it had apparently been lying up against the fence, and a couple of days later what remained of the body was even further into the field. To add to the mystery, there were large clumps of feathers on the riverside path and on the verge close to the river, and it remains a puzzle as to what killed the bird and where. As you can just about make out in the photo, low tension electricity cables cross the field nearby, so it is possible that the swan flew into the wires on a foggy morning. There are a few smallish balls strung along the cables to make them more obvious but, being such large birds, swans can't manoeuvre rapidly in flight, so have difficulty taking evasive action, and there have been incidents of mass mortality on Thanet when swans hit high tension cables strung across the field in which they were feeding. The other mystery is why the head and neck were missing;

predators normally go for the meaty part of the body, leaving the thin pickings of the neck till much later. Was a human trophy hunter involved? Thanks to local resident Dave Hanna's contact in UK Power Networks, it sounds as though a site meeting may be set up to see if more can be done to prevent future accidents.

More signs of winter have been trickling in, with a water rail on 6<sup>th</sup>, 40 fieldfares flying over on 14<sup>th</sup>, the Hambrook flock of snipe building up to 11 on 21<sup>st</sup> (still very low for the time of year) and seven tufted duck on the adjoining Tonford Lake on 21<sup>st</sup> – also a poor count for November. The low numbers of all winter visitors can certainly be attributed to an abnormally mild autumn, in a year when a common darter dragonfly (right) nearby on 22<sup>nd</sup> didn't seem so very startling.

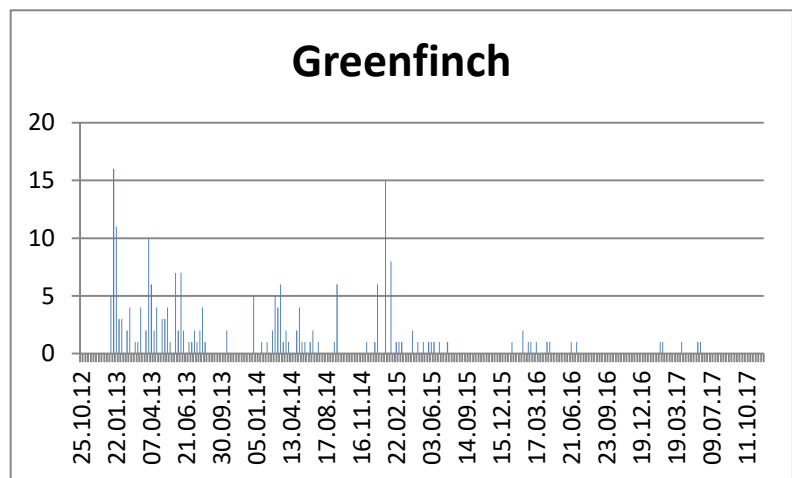


In addition to the unusual warmth, it has been remarkably dry, which has also had an impact on the numbers of snipe choosing to visit the Marshes. The river remained incredibly shallow, so it was delightfully easy to watch a little egret's hunting technique as it rapidly patted its feet to disturb fish and other prey amongst pebbles on the streambed – evidently a very successful tactic.



Having reported a little owl by Toddlers' Cove in the August newsletter, one turned up at the edge of Hambrook Marshes on 6<sup>th</sup> November, quite possibly the same bird. Also seen during the month were 28 goldfinches, 20 long-tailed tits, and seven Canada geese flying over. Greenfinches (left) are in serious decline nationally, thanks to an outbreak of trichomonosis, a disease caused by a protozoan parasite that is known mainly to infect gamebirds and doves, but to which greenfinches also seem to be remarkably susceptible. Deaths from trichomonosis were first noted in 2006, and the disease remains virulent, so it was a small

crumb of comfort to see three greenfinches fly over on 13<sup>th</sup>. It has never been a regular species at Hambrook, but my records for the Westgate Parks (right) show how numbers have declined in just the past five years. Had I begun recording there a few years earlier, the graph's tale would no doubt have been even starker.



My weekly visits to Hambrook are normally at dawn, when there is generally more bird activity and there are few people around to disturb my quiet enjoyment; but this can limit wildlife observations – in summer, butterflies and other insects are less likely to be on the wing, and at any time of year I am going to miss interesting sightings if I don't vary my timings. So it was that, on a wonderfully mild day on 2<sup>nd</sup> November, I was soaking up the sunshine while eating my lunchtime sandwiches when I spotted a buzzard wheeling high in the sky. Nothing so unusual about that these days: in recent years buzzards have been spectacularly successful in recolonising all the countryside from which they had been exterminated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a result of persecution and pesticide poisoning; and yet, I don't normally see them on my early morning walks, simply because their principal hunting technique is to survey the landscape from on high, their sharp eyes on the lookout for any movement or, failing that, carrion – animals killed by other predators, roadkill and so on. But buzzards are quite large birds, and the effort involved in staying aloft for hours on end could prove too energy-



consuming – if a bird uses up more energy looking for food than it derives from the food, it will quickly starve. So the birds need help, and this comes from thermals. We tend to associate thermals with warm summer days when fleecy cumulus clouds dot a blue sky, but in fact they occur throughout the year; anywhere that one patch of ground heats up a little faster than the surrounding area will lead to an updraught on which the buzzards can capitalise. Provided there are thermals scattered across the landscape, the birds can spiral up effortlessly in one with just the slightest adjustments to the angle of wings and tail, and then use the height gained to drift, without wingbeats, gradually losing height until they encounter another thermal that enables them to soar once more. Thermals don't form until sometime after dawn, so buzzards tend to be late risers, explaining why I seldom encounter them on my standard early visits. On this particular day, as my eyes strained to focus on the unplumbable depths of the sky, a second, and then a third bird materialised, and when I put my binoculars up, I soon spotted two more, so high up as to be little more than dots. All five were taking advantage of the thermals, lazily circling, their relative positions in constant flux. Was this a convivial association of related birds? Probably not: at that great height it is likely that rather than hunting, they were advertising their presence to other buzzards from miles around. Perhaps the resident birds, with a detailed knowledge of local thermals, are better able to ride the currents and so impart a subliminal message to any trespassing buzzards that they are not welcome.

*The view shown in the banner photo on page 1 is no longer available, unfortunately, as the Environment Agency has felled all the stems of this magnificent willow that were overhanging the river.*

*Photos of buzzard and greenfinch courtesy of Dave Smith;  
photo of common darter dragonfly courtesy of Glynn Crocker*

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